

Against the Grain

Volume 4 | Issue 2

Article 21

April 1992

Drinking from the Firehose/ Communication, Electronics & Us

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Recommended Citation

Cook, Eleanor (1992) "Drinking from the Firehose/ Communication, Electronics & Us," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 4: Iss. 2, Article 21.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.1183>

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Drinking from the Firehose

Eleanor Cook is the Serials Librarian at ASU and the idea for this column developed from a conversation we had about communication and the effect of new technologies on our daily serial/library/vendor lives. Some other topics to be discussed in future issues are—more on text scanning, text editing, copyright & permissions. Eleanor can be reached at COOKEI@APPSTATE on Bitnet. ATG also welcomes your responses for inclusion in future columns. --Mike Markwith, Assoc. Ed.

Column Editor, **Eleanor Cook** (Appalachian State University)

This is the first of what I hope will be a series of ruminations concerning some of the heretofore unexamined aspects of how and why humans communicate electronically with one another. I hope to maintain a hook to the acquisitions/collection development/serials end of librarianship, but I cannot guarantee that my wanderings will always stay that close to home.

The Internet has changed our lives in both dramatic and imperceptible ways. For instance, the entire correspondence for this piece was first discussed, assigned, and delivered over e-mail. I find that somewhat amusing, since it will be appearing in a publication that is to some degree the antithesis of e-journals and listserves. **ATG** has always, for me, been a personal, intimate newsletter, almost old-fashioned and definitely charming in its demeanor. But it's time to plunge forward and take the electronic bull (gently!) by the horns. Even if we're not ready for **ATG** to "go" electronic, we can at least TALK about what's going on around us.

Like most of you, I am not an expert at using the Internet, although I get around better than some. I am not always sure of myself and am embarrassed by the fact that I haven't learned some of the basics. I want to be able to throw the various jargon terms around with confidence. I want to be able to perform feats of data transfer swiftly and efficiently. My colleagues who ARE experts throw me crumbs now and then, but I still am looking for someone to take me by the hand, sit me down, and show me all those dazzling tricks they take for granted. The truly cool know how to use FTP, belong to dozens of listserves (and manage their files somehow so as not to drown in messages), use distribution lists, nickname files, editing functions, and download and upload with the greatest of ease.

Is e-mail just a fad? Will it go the way of CB radios and 8-track tape players? I hope not and I don't think so. Although, the way we work on the Internet will probably change significantly as the medium becomes (hopefully) more reliable and more sophisticated.

I do not think we can send our mission-critical data down this highway and expect it to always reach its destination intact. Not yet. "Mission-critical data," by the way, is the latest buzzword for the important stuff. In library-land that includes invoices and renewal data, orders, check in data, cataloging records, all the nuts and bolts of the system that holds our collections together.

The Internet right now is for the most part unregulated. If I were to send you an order for a book over e-mail, and you received my message but chose to ignore it, I have no legal recourse. Internet communications are not governed by the FCC, the U.S. Postal Service, the government, or any other single entity. The system is just out there, a series of nodes and networks, connected together like a giant nervous system with no brain. The individual networks do have some controlling body, usually a university or other centrally-funded group, but the fact that they all consent to cooperate is merely a convenience, an act of faith, a gentleman's agreement, if you will.

We have seen a surge of activity on the net in the last few years. How many of us have gone away for a week and come back to HUNDREDS of messages? How many of those messages were important? How much of it is electronic junk mail?

Do you ever worry about what you say and how you say it over the Internet? There have been articles discussing e-mail "etiquette." Have you ever had someone use or forward something

you sent to them without your permission? It's an eerie feeling.

If you work for a state-supported institution, your e-mail is not private, although the bounds of decency have not yet been tested in a court of law, as far as I know. (Suits have been filed against private companies for their monitoring of employees' e-mail, but the murkiness of the medium has resulted in no clear-cut rulings.) All communications, with some exceptions (student records, health records, etc.) that are generated using state property, are considered state property and therefore are public records. Public records, in accordance with state statute, are to be available for inspection by the general public on request. Campus athletic directors have, for instance, learned this lesson the hard way.

Most university computing centers have a code of ethics or conduct or some kind of regulation concerning use of their systems. Most transgressions have revolved around misuse in the form of tampering and introduction of viruses. While the Internet is not completely safe from such mischief, a bad experience a few years ago precipitated some cautionary measures that now make it much harder for viruses to penetrate computers from this avenue.

So, there's a lot to think about as we plan for the future. It's not all technical considerations either. Anything that you can do in a telephone conversation or a letter you can do on e-mail. It's not all business and most of us have come to realize that, if we use it much. You can do committee work, play politics, make a friend, make an enemy, have an affair, convey good news, bad news, or bore someone to tears. You can make a first impression. You can hurt someone's feelings. You can be an electronic shoulder for someone to cry on. It's just another way to communicate.

Or is it? ☞